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## EVENT DETAILS

WHAT: BBR MUSIC GROUP/BMG NASHVILLE  
CRS PARTY

WHEN: THURSDAY, MARCH 19TH, 2026

START TIME: 9:00PM

WHERE: OMNI NASHVILLE HOTEL  
BROADWAY BALLROOM

PLEASE RSVP TO:  
[RSVP@BBRMUSICGROUP.COM](mailto:RSVP@BBRMUSICGROUP.COM)



# Hey-Hi, AI

## A Closer Look At Emerging Uses

**F**or the fourth consecutive year, AI-centered panels will be a hot topic at CRS amid ongoing general debate about the technology's potential. Predictions range from Matrix-inspired doomerism to a super-intelligence fueled utopia in which humanity's prosperity and leisure abound. Meanwhile, the robot vacuum is a nice upgrade from pushing a Hoover, but still occasionally throws itself down the stairs. So where does country music land in all this? Country Aircheck spoke with leaders across many segments of the industry to identify areas where AI tools are becoming transformative ... and where they're not.



### rAldio gaga

Launched last year and led by Joel Denver, Dennis Constantine and Mike Agovino, SonicTrek.ai is up and running on its first station, Triple A KZON/Phoenix. Touting itself as "AI-infused," the station mixes human programming with AI voices licensed from human personalities with local ties.

"We have five formats, including a female-leaning Alternative station, but the folks in Phoenix wanted a AAA, and we put it together in two-and-a-half weeks," says Denver, whose long industry tenure includes *All Access* and *Radio & Records*. "All the hosts are real people who have licensed the use of their voice and likeness. We mention on the air that we are AI and proud of it."

In Country, SonicTrek.ai's product is programmed by former Cumulus VP/Country Charlie Cook and voiced by media vet Suzanne Alexander. Personalities read a sample script that the platform ingests and then uses to create customizable content. "When I joined the company in July of 2024, it would take us weeks to get the voice right," Denver says. "Now our AI partners have helped us dial that in very quickly."

Music is programmed by humans, who also direct the content in breaks – either by writing or with the use of a prompt. "There's a music log, a content log and a commercial log, and the technology marries all that together," Denver says. "We use [Futuri's] Topic Pulse to supply the local content."

"For instance, the tech knows it has 22 seconds for the given content, and what it puts together is on the nose every time," he continues. "The voices never say the same thing the same way twice, so it's not like using a recorded liner over and over. It's getting better all the time, to the point we have to do very little writing now. We can say, 'Song and artist front-sell, 21 seconds,' and it just does it."

Though the voices are sourced from real personalities, the uncanny valley sometimes rises to the fore. A recent break on KZON found the female AI voice commenting on Olympian Lindsey Vonn's recent bad luck including breaking her leg and having a dog die. The virtual jock then commiserated, noting that it (she?) had also recently lost a "fur baby." The laugh-out-loud moment raised questions about exactly how sad it is when an AI radio personality imagines its AI pet passed away.

Occasional (or maybe intended) dissonance aside, the SonicTrek.ai goal is not to displace existing talent. After all, radio companies haven't needed AI to accomplish that. "We're not looking to terminate jobs, we're intending to help underutilized stations that aren't making money – Class C or B stations that can plug a format hole in the market," Denver says. "In the case of KZON, they wanted local voices, so we hired three people who weren't on the air at the time to be among the station's voices."

"They sound pretty human," he says. "Every once in a while it's a little stilted, but I'll match our content up to voice tracking any day. It's that smooth, for the most part. And it does what voice tracking can't, which is deliver content specific to the market."



Joel Denver



Dave Pomeroy

### Suno What I Mean?

Unquestionably, the creative space is seeing the biggest impact. Apps including Suno and Udio allow near-master quality songs to be generated with only a few prompts. Nashville songwriters are using the technology to create demos (see sidebar, next page), with some even applying AI versions of an artist's voice to pitch songs to said artist. For reasons including the impact to human musicians, legal issues and general ethics, use of these apps is controversial.

While members of the creative community are reluctant to speak on the record – hence the anonymous sidebar author – the utility is hard to deny. Publishers report using Suno to re-demo older catalog songs whose existing demos sound dated, or to lift a rough guitar-vocal into something that sounds fully produced, improving chances of getting a cut.

As for the impact on demo sessions and human players in general, Nashville Musicians Assoc. (AFM Local 257) President **Dave Pomeroy** has thoughts. "When I came up through the session world, a lot of times it was just a guitar-vocal and the musician charts were written from that," he says. "The players arranged and created their own parts. In cases like Jason Aldean, the guys who played on the demo session that got him a record deal were asked to play on the record. When the record took off, they became his touring band. Now, people say, 'Give me a Jason Aldean feel with a Keith Urban lyric and have Toby Keith sing it.' Ethically, that ain't right."

To be clear, the most popular apps – which are in various stages of being sued or settling with labels over using copyrighted training data – assert that their systems block blatant imitation. But songwriters know better. "You can't use an artist's name as a prompt," says one. "It will give me a warning if I say, 'Make this sound like George Strait.' But I've seen guys go to ChatGPT and type, 'Give me a good Suno prompt for a George Strait song,' copy that over to Suno and it usually catches the drift."

Even without mimicry, there can be legal issues. "I've heard of at least one situation where either the publisher or label heard a track and asked where the melodies came from, and it was Suno," Pomeroy says. "They were told to go back and put together a new melody out of fear of getting sued."

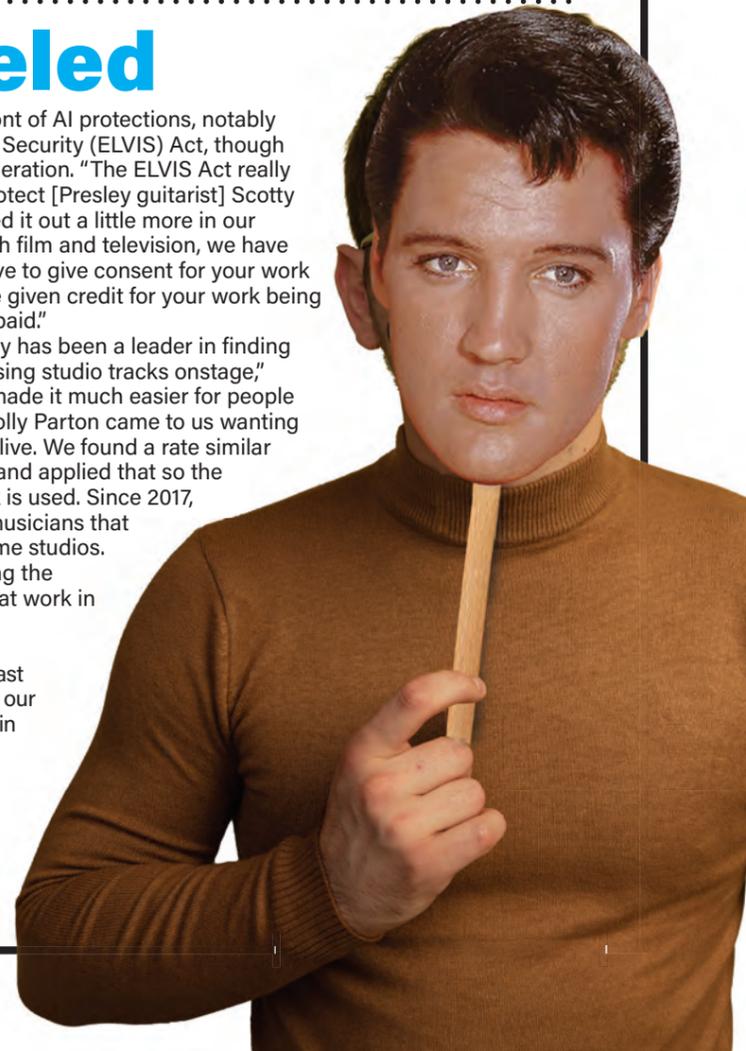
Then there's the concern about putting proprietary info into an AI that could draw on that for its own uses. A 2023 internal memo from iHeartMedia CEO Bob Pittman and President Rich Bressler urged employees not to "use AI tools like ChatGPT on company devices or in relation to company work, or put any company documents into them." As for songwriters putting their work into Suno and the like, one writer suggests their meager individual inputs are dwarfed by what is already in the system and calls it "the cost of doing business" with a helpful AI tool.

### Don't Be Fueled

The state of Tennessee has been at the forefront of AI protections, notably with the Ensuring Likeness Voice and Image Security (ELVIS) Act, though downstream musicians may need further consideration. "The ELVIS Act really only protected Elvis," Pomeroy says. "It didn't protect [Presley guitarist] Scotty Moore. The union has taken that idea and fleshed it out a little more in our negotiations. In the agreements we got with both film and television, we have something called the three Cs. Consent: you have to give consent for your work to be used to generate AI. Credit: you have to be given credit for your work being the source. And Compensation: you have to be paid."

Interestingly, the Nashville creative community has been a leader in finding solutions. "For years, our contracts prohibited using studio tracks onstage," Pomeroy says. "But as the Ableton technology made it much easier for people to use recorded tracks live, Jason Aldean and Dolly Parton came to us wanting to use tracks from instruments they didn't carry live. We found a rate similar to what is used for traveling theater companies and applied that so the original musician gets paid every night the track is used. Since 2017, we've collected more than a million dollars for musicians that way. We did something similar with rates for home studios. It's interesting that Nashville has gone from being the hillbilly cousin to coming up with approaches that work in the real world."

And for all the distress about what AI may do to musicians, the numbers send a different signal. "Last year we moved \$12 million in scale wages through our building, which is the second best year we've had in the last 10," Pomeroy says. "So there's a lot of good stuff going on. Big picture, people are going to get bored with [AI]. In the end, it's going to make authenticity that much more valuable. Humans aren't giving themselves enough credit for being able to tell the difference between real and fake."



# A WIN FOR SONGWRITERS! MAYBE?

*An anonymous songwriter's perspective on AI:*



One of my favorite parts of the job used to be gathering my new tunes and booking a demo session. Working with the world's best musicians in the world's best studios was a privilege and a thrill. The entire process, including vocals and mixing, usually took a week or two. The results often weren't exactly what you wanted, but you did your best within the time constraints. It could be time-consuming and expensive – \$800 to \$1,000 per song.

I now use Suno to create many of my demos. Released in late 2024, this AI-based program is quick, cheap and gives me unlimited options. I can change tempos, vocalists and keys with the click of a button anywhere I am. If you know what you're doing and are patient, the quality matches a studio demo. I pay less than \$100 a year.

Although I know it has the capability, I don't use Suno for ideas, lyrics or melodies. That's where I draw the line. Experimentally, I once had it generate a new melody to an existing lyric and my mind was blown...as it was the first time I saw Napster.

**Some background:** About 15 years ago, recording software (a la Logic and ProTools) became ubiquitous and the "Track Guy" entered the writing room. These were producers of varied skill who built the demo as you wrote. Some of them were *also* songwriters in the traditional sense, meaning they had the specific ability to create commercial ideas, lyrics and/or melodies. Some were not. Music publishers quickly signed Track Guys because they reduced demo costs to \$0. For the record, they receive equal writing credit...it's just how we do it in Nashville.

Concurrent with the rise of the Track Guy, for the first time in the country format, almost every signed artist expected to be involved in the writing of most or all of their own material. Again, some artists are indisputably *also* great writers. But now many who had never honed this unique craft were dubbed "singer-songwriters" overnight and thrown into the Nashville co-writing machine. Unsurprisingly, the quality of the song itself often became secondary. It's a common belief that many a viable act harmed their chance at a meaningful career, unwisely convinced by themselves or others they had to write their own songs.

During this same period streaming services proliferated, paying a much lower rate to songwriters. Quickly, mechanical royalties from the sale of physical product or downloads virtually disappeared. This was the only source of income for many writers who were still working toward their first radio hit.

One last thing: it used to be common to see just one or two names on a country songwriting credit. Today, a "two-way" is rare, and you can all but forget about a "100%er." Now we see three, four, five, six and seven names listed. Again, writing credit, and the rare resulting royalty, is typically evenly split.

The combination of these developments has been a near-death sentence for Nashville professional songwriting as we have known it. Stakeholders have been unable or unwilling to stop the dilution of what has always been country music's most important element: the song itself. Is it mere coincidence that our supposed heyday was the '90s when the mantra on Music Row was "Best Song Wins?"

**Back to AI:** Given all this, AI for demo creation is the first thing to come along in a while that can benefit the Nashville pro writer: The one who sweats out 200 good ones to get to that *great* one; the one who has refined this unique craft over a course of years. He or she can now write by themselves and get a viable demo quickly and inexpensively. Granted, it's still almost impossible to get an "outside song" cut, but that's another issue. Countless career-making, genre-defining songs go unheard and unrecorded.

I hate that AI directly and negatively impacts musicians, studios and engineers. I'd rather go back and work with real people in a real studio. Alas, the capitalistic gods of efficiency and economy are difficult to deny.

I suspect AI may eventually take over a good piece of what I do as well ... if it hasn't already. Or maybe it can help us get back to focusing on ideas, lyrics and melodies and not the "business" of songwriting. Time will tell.

I'm grateful I came along when I did, and I feel for the gifted and deserving writers chasing their dream today and in the future. I wrote this for them. In these challenging times, may they find a way to keep alive what has long been a uniquely Nashville tradition.

## FAKE VIEWS

The argument can be made that there is little difference, conceptually, from a program ingesting copyrighted music as a way to influence the creation of its own material, and a human doing the same. The AI-to-human delta, of course, is scale. No single human could ever listen to all the recorded music ever made, as that would take somewhere between 4,000 and 7,000 years (according to Anthropic's Claude). But AI models have, presumably, done just that.

Where scale is scary is in the nefarious ways artists, music and fans are preyed upon by criminals. Some artists employ companies whose role is to spot fake stories, advertisements and other uses of name, likeness and voice to dupe consumers. "We do it ourselves, but it's like playing whack-a-mole," says Make Wake Artists'

Chris Kappy, who manages Luke Combs among others. "Every time you think you figured out a way to stop it, they morph it into something else. It's no different than ticket scalpers or merch toads. These people are using everything they can to take advantage, which makes it hard for the true fan to know what to trust. And that's tough for us, because fans are who we care about. It's maddening."

Even finding legal uses for AI tools sometimes hits a hard boundary. "Are we using it to do radio liners – no," Kappy says. "As easy as it would make things, you're just lying. It takes away from some of the relationship you have with your fans."

In fact, other than the aforementioned creative tools, most of the AI usage cited by the dozen or so individuals contacted for this story comes down to some version of

employing LLMs as a turbo-charged search tool. "We'll use it for something like, 'How many country artists have sold out Wembley Stadium?'" says Kappy. "Or, 'What's the best routing for this tour of 20 cities with the shortest amount of travel time?' And then we still have to tear it apart because it's not going to understand all the nuances. But it gives you a place to start"

Perhaps tellingly, even the search capabilities of LLMs remain far from foolproof. A Claude prompt asking, "When did CRS hold its first AI-centered panel discussion," returned a result of 2024. A little manual human digging in the **Country Aircheck** archives found that it was, in fact, 2023 with a panel titled, "Let's Chat: GPT and A.I. DJs." When informed, Claude replied, "Good to know – thanks for the correction!"

CAC



Chris Kappy

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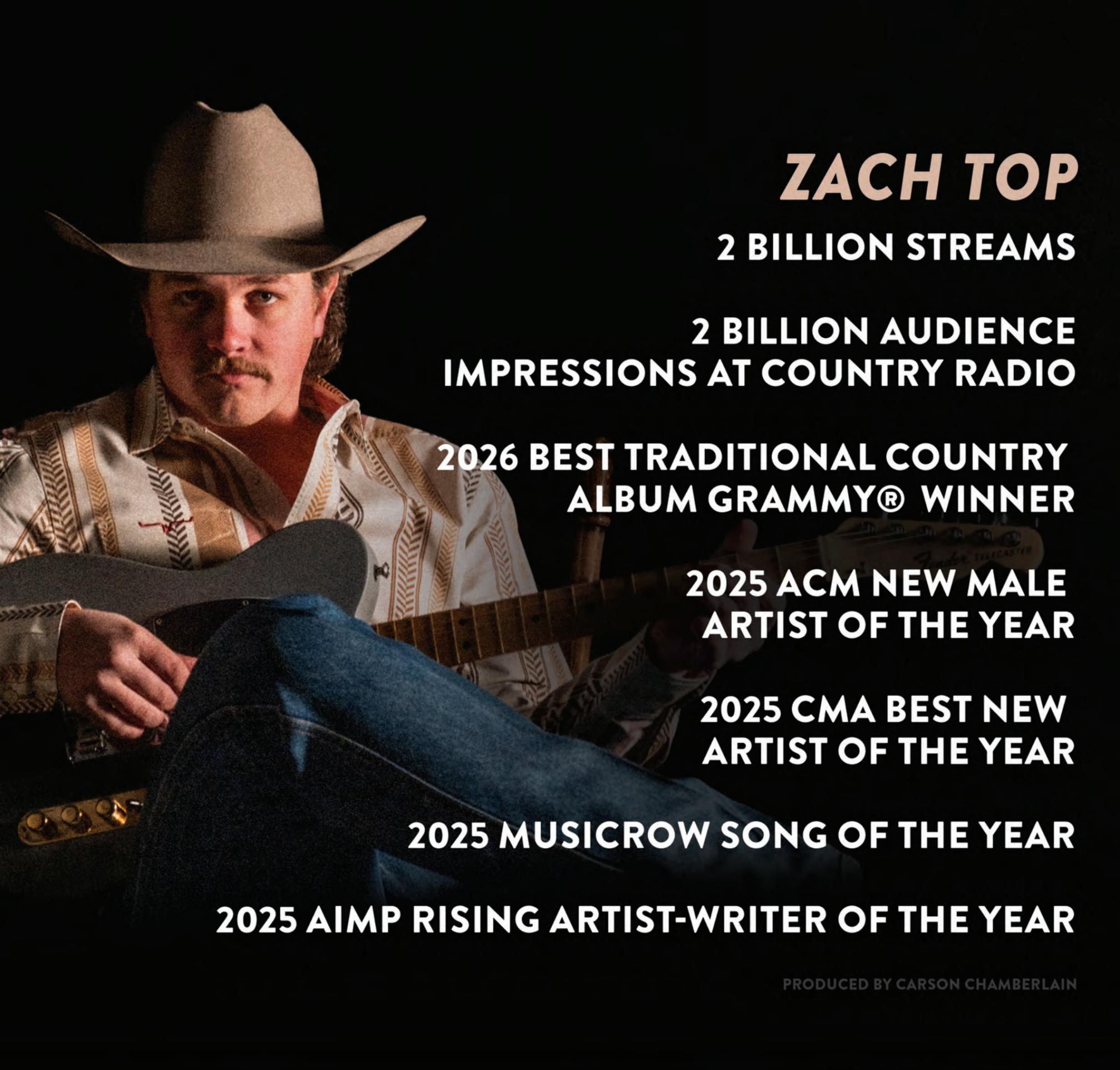
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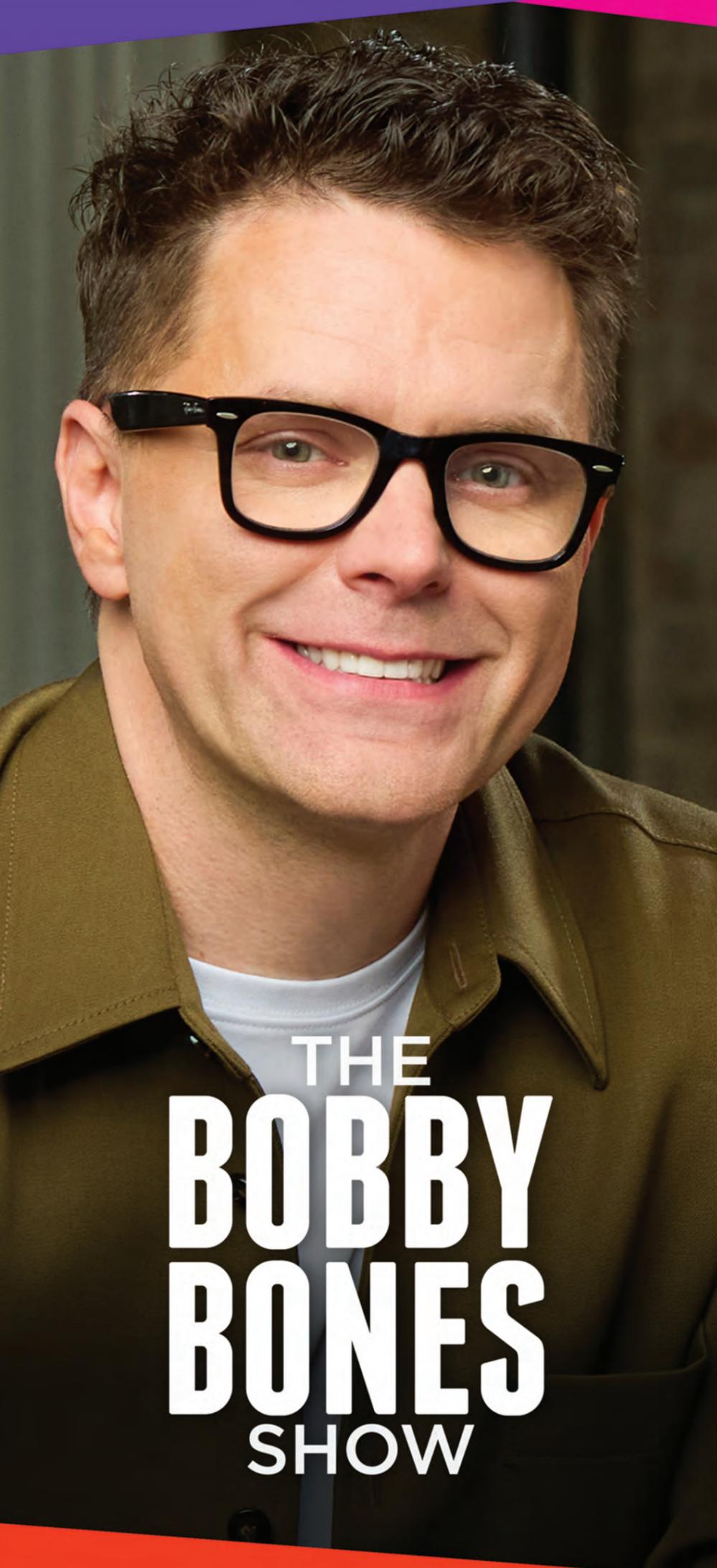
**WE GOTTA SMASH.**

**KANE  
BROWN  
"WOMAN"**

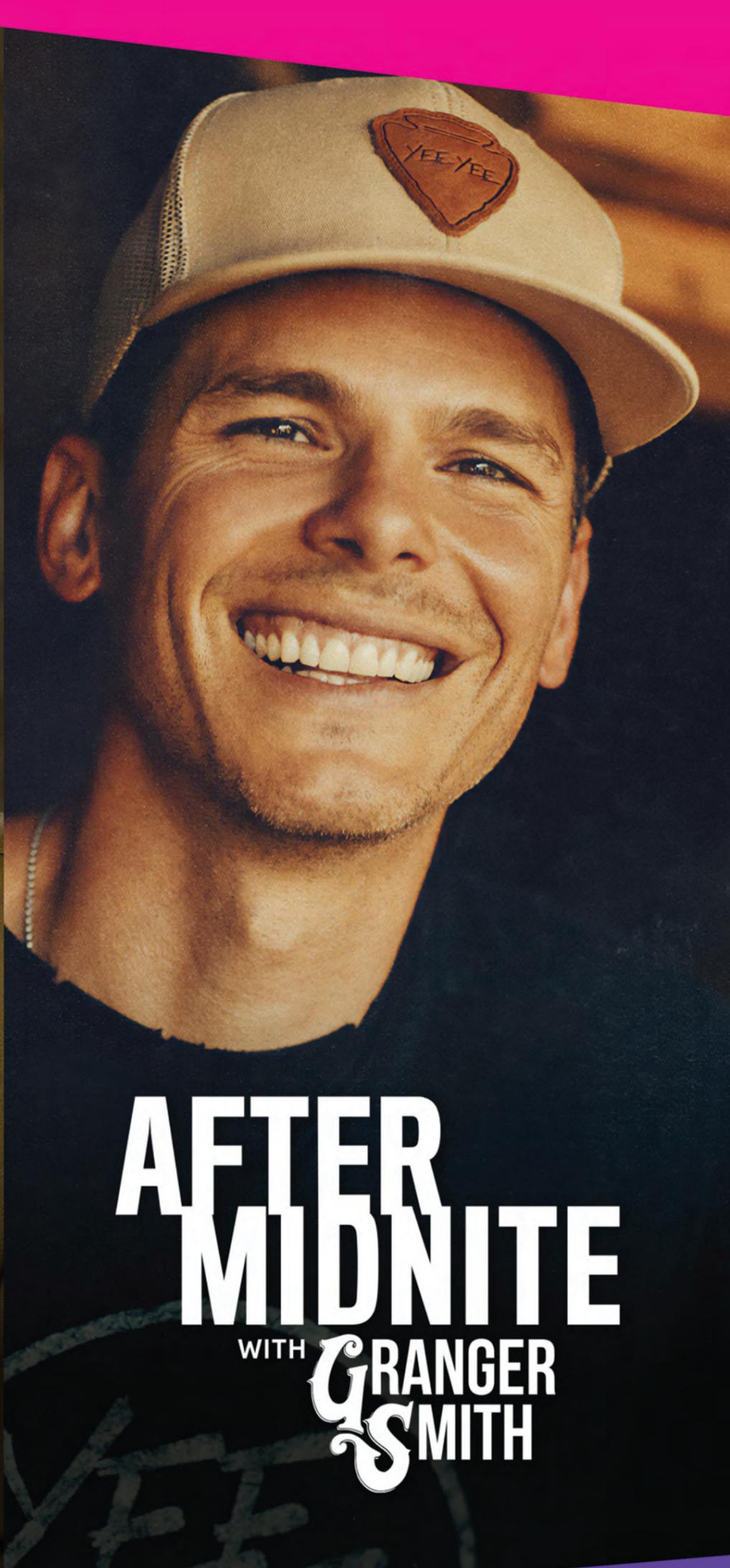
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# THE SCHOOL, KIDS



## Best Lessons Gleaned From CRS

**W**idely held view: If you don't learn something at Country Radio Seminar, that's a you problem. With that in mind, we asked execs with more than a few under their belt to share a few things they learned, heard or saw at a CRS that stuck with them or helped in their careers. Their answers ranged from wise to poignant to laugh-out-loud funny.

**RJ Meacham, Curb Records SVP/Promotion:** I went with a couple of teammates to check out a session on mental health and wellness. It ended up being a pretty packed room, and I was sharing a row with heads of promo, label heads and other successful industry folks who outwardly always appear to have their shit together. I'll never forget seeing tears in some of their eyes throughout that session and commiserating with them on our shared trials and tribulations in this job – and its impact on home life. The general sense of togetherness was deeply felt. It's so easy to get lost in our own heads like we are on an island facing life's challenges solo, but that is very rarely the case. That session compels me to this day to reach out to my peers in tough times, and be there for them when they need me.



RJ Meacham

**Miranda McDonald, MCA VP/Promotion:** One thing I've learned at CRS is to always schedule time to cry alone in your room when you run out of bandwidth for interacting. Truly, I think the most important thing is to just be present. It sounds simple, but so many opportunities, connections



Miranda McDonald

and ideas are made when you're simply in the right place at the right time.

**Travis Moon, Radio-One Houston Dir./Operations:** The biggest lesson I've learned is that there isn't just one playbook that wins in radio. There are fundamentals, but the magic needed is different for each station or market. I found that some of the best radio stations understand their city at its most intimate level, right in the trenches. That's why some of the best radio in America is happening in smaller markets and they are fun to listen to.

I also learned after my first CRS in 1996 "do not stay up all night." I mean like *all* night. I am pretty sure I went without sleep; that entire first CRS at the Opryland Hotel. Sure, I got worn out trying to chase Lon Helton around so he would notice my station, KUBL/Salt Lake City, and put us on the panel. But I also learned that no one can really keep up with Lon at CRS. [Ed. Note: Or any social gathering, really.]



Jude Walker



Travis Moon

of themed party, don't do it. You'll be one of only three nerds who got the assignment. (Not like that's ever happened to me or anything.)

Also, sit in on panels that you don't think you'll get anything from. That's where you learn the most.



Dale Carter

**Dale Carter, KFKF & KBEQ/Kansas City PD:** I have rarely left CRS without an idea or two that I could implement immediately. Last year I went to the "AI Curious" panel and boldly went forward with AI as a tool to make my show better.

From my first CRS in 1985, I learned to network. "Growth through sharing" was the motto, and I've seen it. From a 21-year-old blown away by the giants to an old guy giving advice, CRS has been a big factor in my career.

On a personal note, I learned that it's important to take Tylenol before bedtime when excessive drinking has occurred. The worst hangover of my life happened after the Montgomery Gentry showcase at 12th & Porter!

**Marci Braun, WUSN/Chicago & KMNB/Minneapolis Brand Mgr:** You'd think I'd have learned after attending 20-plus seminars that it's a walk, not a sprint in terms of your first night on campus. Nope. Still haven't learned that lesson. Learn from me. Ease in.

The thing that has stuck with me in terms of learning from CRS, was that no matter the market size, everyone is there to help grow our format. My first CRS, I went to a panel because Becky Brenner was the moderator, and I knew she was a big deal. We became friends over the years, and I still ask for her advice on



Marci Braun

things. How wild is that?

**Heather Froglear, KFRG/Riverside, CA PD/Air Personality:**

When I was on the agenda committee in 2016, I believe, we started the first Women's Mentoring Breakfast. It has become one of the most popular panels for up-and-coming stars to hear from some really incredible leaders in our format. That event is one of my most favorite, and I continue to learn a lot from it myself.

I also learned to keep a menopause hand fan on standby if you go to the Ping Pong tournament. It gets hot in there!

**Anna Cage, Warner Records Nashville VP/Radio:**



Anna Cage



Heather Froglear

I have learned never to try to say hi (or bye) to everyone in the room. Just focus on the person you are talking to in the moment. Nobody wants to have a conversation

with someone who is constantly looking over their shoulder.

**Angie Ward, WUBL/Atlanta APD and iHeartMedia Personality:**

I learned that Jelly Roll and Eric Church are besties. And to always carry Throat Coat tea, because you will most likely lose your voice from all the talking.



Angie Ward

**Bill Macky, Black River VP/National Promotion:** I learned that you can't

# THE SCHOOL, KIDS



Bill Macky

roll a marching band through the Wildhorse Saloon. I believe Scott Borchetta got banned for the rest of CRS the year when we did that [at MCA]. So much fun!

The CRS keynote speakers are “can’t miss.” I still have notes dating as far back as 1997 from Oren Harari that helped me greatly. Lou Holtz, Terry Bradshaw, Charles Osgood and so many others were terrific.



Lauren Thomas

**Lauren “LT” Thomas, Big Loud SVP/Promotion:** Do not peak early. A four-day long hangover is not ideal, and any amount of sleep is better than the alternative.

Do introduce your friends. Networking is just as important as attending panels. Plus, you never know if they could end up engaged. (See: Olivia Hanceri and Tim Clarke.)

**Krista Hayes, BBR Music Group Mgr./Group Strategy, Syndication & Secondary Promotion:** CRS taught me that the panels are very important, but sometimes the real magic happens in the lobby. It’s where I’ve had some of the most honest, unfiltered conversations about our industry – the kind you don’t always get onstage, but that absolutely shape your career.



Krista Hayes

Second, pace yourself! Yes, I am talking about the suite parties, the before-and-after parties and everything in-between. It’s like a family reunion – exciting to see your cousins, but still, hydrate and pace yourself!

**Tim Leary, WIRK/West Palm Beach Morning Co-host:** Do not eat “Shut the Cluck Up” at Hattie B’s Hot Chicken the day before you fly home from CRS! It’s a memory you don’t want. Trust me.



Tim Leary



JoJo Turnbeaugh

**JoJo Turnbeaugh, iHeartMedia Region SVP/Programming:** We are all in sales. Every year I leave with new ideas to generate more revenue.

And never leave your phone in an Uber (last year for me). What an absolute disaster.

**Shelley Hargis, BBR Music Group VP/Syndication & Group Strategy:** One thing I learned in a research panel years ago is that Pandora Top Thumbs is very predictive of telling a hit record at radio, and we use that info time and time again to this day.



Shelley Hargis

I also learned to not go too hard on

the first night of CRS, because it’s the Liver Olympics and you must last all week long.

And never invite hockey players to your after-party in your suite, because they will get drunk and tackle you onto a blow-up couch like they’re on the ice and just dropped the gloves! Or should we, because the Preds beat the Blackhawks the next night?

**Scott Roddy, Audacy RVPP/Brand Mgr:** Twenty some years ago, there



Scott Roddy

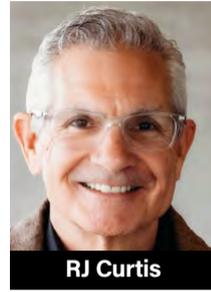
was a consultant and a research firm who shared a great music clock plot. I loved the approach and still use it to this day.

I also learned to keep my curtains closed while I watch Sports Center.

to stay at CRS. Those wild and crazy nights don’t need to be talked about again.

On a serious note, strike up a conversation with random people because you never know how they can help your career down the road. Most attendees love meeting new people and helping how they can.

**RJ Curtis, CRS Exec. Dir:** My second year at CRS, I was in my 20s, knew nobody and *was* nobody. This was 1986 at the Opryland Hotel. Late one evening I was suite hopping and, in a jam-packed room, noticed a then-very-high-profile PD sitting in a chair in the middle of the room, holding court. Cocktail in one hand, cigarette in the other. The center of attention. I hung in that room a long time talking to a high-profile consultant who was actually giving me the time of day. We’re having the conversation



RJ Curtis

**“It’s the core purpose of CRS, and if you learn nothing, well, that’s a you problem. Come back next year and try to be more curious!”**

**-RJ Curtis**

**Rick Kelly, Marco Promotions VP/Radio & Streaming Marketing:** What sticks with me

is how one truly incredible performance at a luncheon or showcase can change the course of an artist’s life. I also learned which part of the Renaissance Hotel *not* to stay in.



Rick Kelly

**Gator Harrison, HeartCountry Brand Coord./SVPP Nashville:** A lesson I learned from Marc Chase that I have applied to every CRS is to sit with people you don’t know and interview them like they’re on your podcast. You not only grow your knowledge, you grow your friend group.

And when Rod Phillips asks you to go to Broadway, even if you don’t drink (which I don’t), you always say yes, ‘cause it’s always fun!



Gator Harrison

**Kevin Callahan, Pamal Exec. Dir./Operations & Programming:** There have

been so many moments, but one I truly treasure was seeing Rusty Walker announced for induction into the Country Radio Hall of Fame. Rusty was one of my mentors, and it is a memory I will keep always.

From a different angle, I have also deduced that if your room key card is going to quit working at CRS, the chances are highest after midnight and too many Bushwhackers.

**Paisley Dunn-Banks, WFKY & WVKY/Frankfort, KY Mornings:** This is my sixth CRS, and I’ve learned that what happens at CRS needs



Paisley Dunn-Banks

of the year about programming, music, artists, you name it, when I finally look around and see the room has thinned out to about a dozen people.

The PD holding court? In the same chair, passed out and slumped over, drink long gone with a long ash curling toward the floor from his cigarette. Everyone left is laughing and pinning their badges on him (CRS credentials had pins, not lanyards back then). A photo was taken and ended up in *Radio & Records* the next week. It sounds funny, but was an important lesson: Don’t be “that guy” at CRS, because everyone is watching and – especially now – everybody has a camera.

Another learning: Try to talk to everyone and anyone, no matter their industry status or stardom. My first four years at CRS I was intimidated by the big names in our format, but swallowed hard and approached them anyway. Guess what I found out? They were friendly, helpful and normal. They were radio people, and radio people are the best people. I discovered I could talk radio with them because we all love this business. I don’t think I’ve ever met a single asshole at CRS.

I’m going to quote Ted Lasso, who quoted Walt Whitman (inaccurately, as it turns out): When you come to CRS, “be curious, not judgmental.” Be open to music discovery, people from different places with different approaches and opinions, and be curious about the education offered. It’s the core purpose of CRS, and if you learn nothing, well, that’s a you problem. Come back next year and try to be more curious!

**Jamice Jennings, Records Nashville Sr. Dir. National Promotion & Commercial Strategy:** I definitely learned to pace myself. The days start early and go long, so it is very important to pace yourself on everything. Get rest. Drink Dr. Pepper.

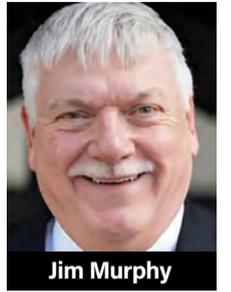
I also learned to pay attention in the panels because there is some truly valuable information. The CRS Agenda Committee works hard to offer sessions that will help you in your career. I take so many notes. “Cycle of a Song” is one of the most interesting



Jamice Jennings

panels where you hear all that goes into creating a No. 1 single: the launch, streaming, radio, TV appearances – timing is so important.

**Jim Murphy, Music Choice Dir./Country Programming:** Back when CRS attracted artists (both newcomers and big stars) for station liners and radio interviews, Jones Radio Networks had the opportunity to interview Willie Nelson on the debut of his Old Whiskey River bourbon. Of course, Willie invited our team to sample his product. What I learned that day was that having whiskey with Willie is perfectly acceptable at any hour – in this case, 11am. What I *didn’t* learn until much later was that hanging onto that bottle would have been worth upwards of \$3,000 today. So, be careful of the promo items you leave behind in your hotel room at CRS.



Jim Murphy

**John Shomby, Country’s Radio Coach:** I learn something from the CRS Research Study every year. Always has good, new information about the format that I apply in some way.

And the artist one-on-ones from the past couple of years have been entertaining and insightful. You find out things you don’t get from a radio interview.

On a personal note: I learned

that you can’t attend everything every night, especially if you want to be alert for the full day ahead. Two big flu bouts following a couple of seminars taught me that.

**Gregg Swedberg, iHeartMedia Strategic Advisor:** The first thing

I ever saw at CRS as I walked into the Opryland Hotel was Coyote Calhoun with his infamous nudie jacket and boots. And I thought every PD in Country wore that. What I learned was that nobody could carry it off like Coyote.



Roger Fregoso



Gregg Swedberg

**Roger Fregoso, Riser House National Dir./Promotion:** I learned that when somebody leaves after the first day of CRS, mind my business and don’t ask questions

**Brent Michaels, KUZZ/Bakersfield PD/Mornings:** In a programming mentoring breakfast, Rod Phillips told me a great daily goal is to make your radio station one percent better. Whether it’s writing a new piece of imaging, a conversation with one of your talents, or tightening up something small, try to leave each day with the station that one percent better than when you walked in.

On a broader level, CRS has taught me that there is no community like the country music community. We root for each other, we work together, we are passionate about the artists and genre we love. Radio, records, DSPs, the artists and their teams – we all play a role in bringing joy to country music fans everywhere, and CRS is the greatest celebration of that. **CAC**



Brent Michaels



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**CRS 2026**

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IN MUSIC ROW ROOM #2**

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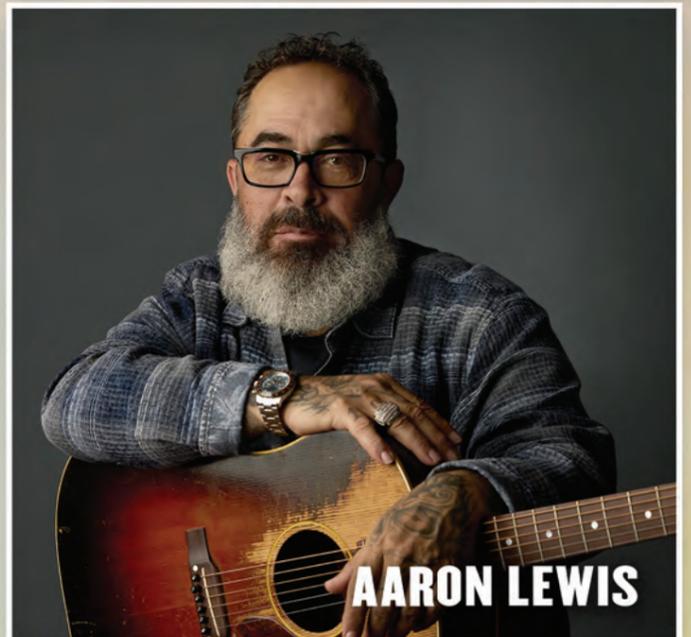
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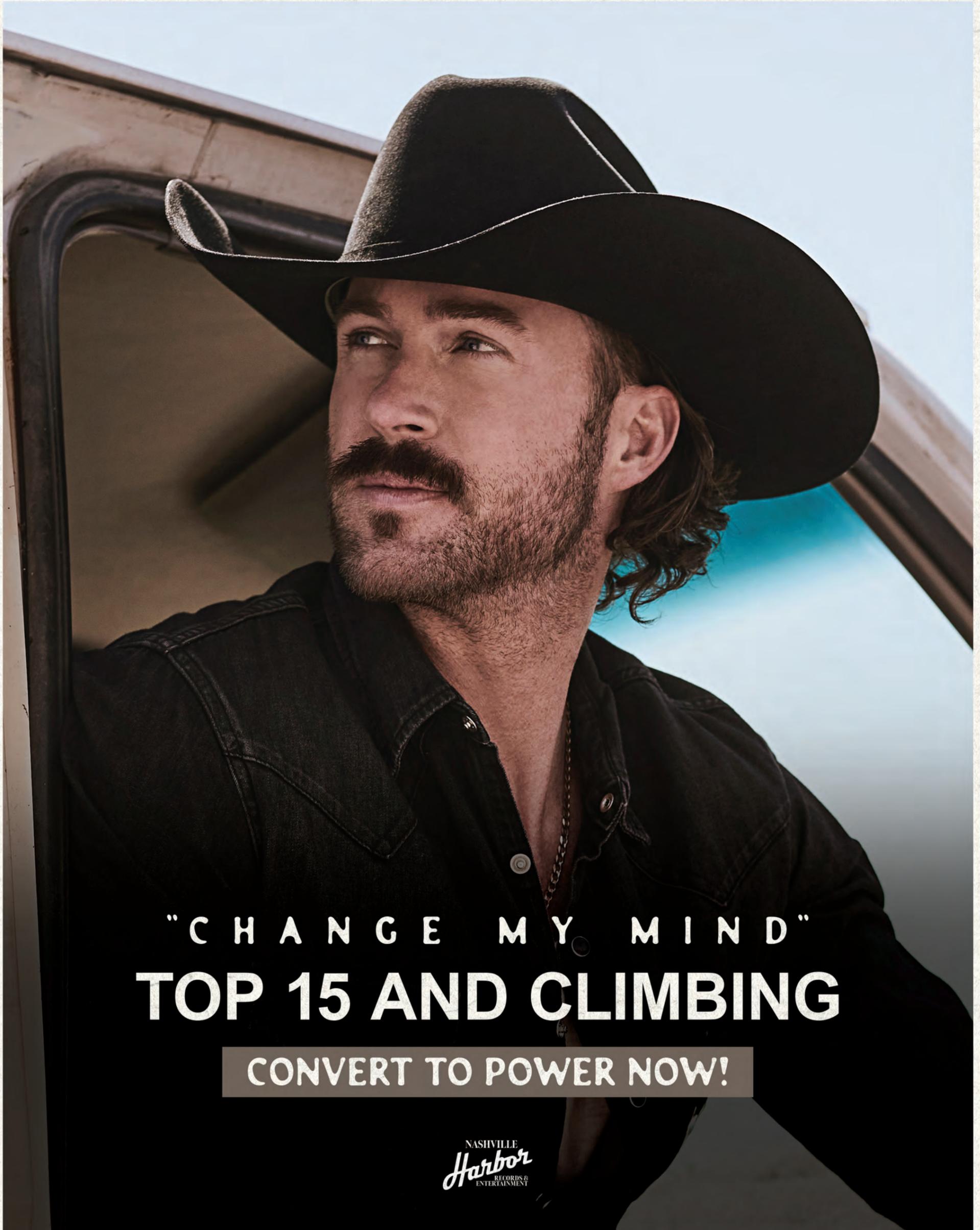


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# RILEY GREEN

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# NEW CLASS is in SESSION

**For rising artists, New Faces represents both recognition and momentum. The 2026 class shares the moments, lessons and milestones that led them to Country radio's most anticipated stage.**



**N***ew Faces* is like a rite of passage. You almost have to go through there if you want to be a name in radio, but it's not forced. It's something you *want* to do. It's a good thing and an honor. I've seen so many friends get *New Faces* and watched the trajectory of their careers afterward. So it's a blessing that I'm grateful and thankful for.

One of my favorite memories at *CRS* was getting to play "Darlin'" there for the first time two years ago. The reaction was just ... awesome. Looking at it now, seeing the success it's had and becoming a crowd favorite, it shows how many doors that moment opened for us. To be recognized and get to premiere it at *CRS* was really cool.

I'm just a normal guy – an ATV mechanic who loves to make music, and I love Country radio. The reason I want to be on radio so bad is because I grew up with the radio always on. I think about the kid who's just like me, maybe listening to my music now, and the inspiration that could lead to. I make music for the guys sitting on their tailgates around bonfires playing guitar and listening to the radio. I hope I get to inspire people the same way Jason Aldean, Luke Bryan, FGL, Brantley Gilbert and so many others inspired me.

Getting to go back out on tour with Jason Aldean is huge. The first time was my biggest tour ever and my first time going on the road with another artist, and for that to be with one of my all-time favorite country artists was really special. For him to ask us back out means even more, and now we're direct support. I've had an absolute blast with Jason and gotten to know him really well. He's one of the most open-arms artists in country music. Watching his stage presence and how he interacts with the crowd taught me a lot. His fans are incredibly dedicated, and that's something I dream of having.

I don't feel like we're selling tickets so much as inviting people to be part of an experience. Everybody's welcome, no matter where you're from or what you believe. Music brings people together, and that's what it's about for me.

## CHASE MATTHEW

One thing I still carry from being a mechanic is that hard work gets you where you want to be. There are no handouts. I spent years busting wrenches and knuckles, fixing things over and over until I found the problem, and I use that same mindset with my music and my team. If there's an issue, we fix it. We don't sit in the problem, we find the solution.

Leaving my mechanic job was a slow transition. My boss was really cool and let me move from full-time to part-time as long as I got my work done. The pivotal moment came when one of my first songs, "County Line," started streaming really big. It went gold independently and then platinum independently. That's when I knew this is what I'm going to do for the rest of my life. There was no more second-guessing. We were in.

Choosing radio singles is always tough. Usually it's the song that raises its hand – the one fans are reacting to the most. But I also think Country radio should have more exclusivity again. I remember hearing new songs on the radio growing up that you couldn't find anywhere else, and that made radio feel special. That's why with "Holdin' It Down" we wanted radio to get it right away.

The collaboration with Lauren Alaina happened on the Aldean tour. She'd had a tough year, and we became good friends out there. Her husband Cam told me she had a song and wanted me to hear it, then asked me to pretend I'd never heard it when she played it for me. I had already learned the lyrics overnight, so I was trying not to sing along while she played it on the bus. She asked if I wanted to do it together, and of course I said yes. Now it's climbing at Country radio, and she only recently found out the whole story.

The first time I heard myself on the radio – huge shoutout to Nikki Thomas at WXBQ/Johnson City – I was at a county fair show and she played "County Line." My dad and I jumped in the truck, turned it up full blast, and all the fans were lined up outside. I jumped out yelling, "We're on the radio," and everyone started singing along with the doors open and the music blasting. That was a really cool moment, and I'll thank her for the rest of my life for that.

I hope people look back and say *New Faces* was the beginning of Chase Matthew becoming a household name ... the start of reaching Country radio in a bigger way and inspiring people to chase their dreams. We're getting there little by little, becoming more of a common conversation, and I'm just grateful Country radio is letting me do that.

**W**hen I got the phone call about *New Faces*, I was just shocked. I've been to *CRS* a couple times and gotten to be part of the event. Knowing how special it is and seeing so many who had that opportunity go on to do big things, it feels like a really special moment in my career. I'm super excited to be a part of it.

One of my favorite *CRS* memories was my first year. I've always been a huge Blake Shelton fan, and he performed with Gwen [Stefani] that year. Backstage was the first time I got to meet and talk with Blake, so that was a really cool moment.

The biggest turning point for me as an artist probably came after I wrote "Life With You." When it came out and started doing its thing, we played the *Music Row Happy Hour* on SiriusXM and that night they announced it had gone No. 1 on The Highway. It was also the first time I played it live and heard a crowd screaming the song back. That was the moment where I really felt a shift happening.

## KELSEY HART

Trace Adkins cut a song of mine called "Livin' It Lonely," one of my favorite songs I've ever been part of writing. I'm glad Trace recorded it and he did a great job with it. Early in my career when I was writing a lot more, we'd sometimes go into writing sessions aiming toward a specific artist if I already knew which songs I planned to record. These days, since I'm on the road so much and don't get to write as often, when I do write I'm mostly writing toward what I'm doing as an artist.

Being a songwriter first definitely shaped how I approach being an artist. When I got to town, my goal was just to get the best songs possible. I'd always sung since I was a kid, but I realized the songs had to be great to even stand a chance. Spending five or six years writing before ever putting music out helped me understand the level songs have to reach and figure out what I want to say.

Growing up singing in church probably influenced me more vocally than as a writer. I was a big fan of gospel music, and a lot of gospel singers are some of the best vocalists in the world. Trying to sing along with those artists helped shape me as a singer more than anything.

Becoming a dad has definitely changed my perspective. It's not just me and my wife anymore. We've got a little girl at home now, and I want to give her the best life we can. It makes me want to work harder and build the best career possible so I can provide for my family.

I'm still very early in figuring out the balance between family and touring since she's only eight weeks old, but when I'm home, it's about being as present as possible. Hopefully putting in the work during these early years of my career will allow me to be home more as she gets older.

My wife was very involved in my journey early on. When I first started touring, she was out on the road with us, basically acting as tour manager, selling merch, and doing whatever she could to help. Once she got pregnant, she decided to stay home, but those years on the road helped her understand everything about how this works.

I hope *New Faces* is looked back on as the beginning of a long career ... the foundation for everything that comes next. It's a big opportunity to get in front of the radio community and give people a chance to see what you can do.

With "Life With You," a lot of people may know me as more of a ballad artist, but our live show is pretty rocking. I want people to walk away realizing there's more in the tank and more sides to what I do.



The decades party at CRS is always a good time. Last year I got to sing one of my favorite Skynyrd songs, so that was fun. There have always been a few cool moments, but I think this one will probably top them all for me. I'm really looking forward to it.

I've got a lot of radio tour memories since I've been on one pretty consistently for three or four years now, and there are a lot of good folks in the industry that I've

## JOHN MORGAN

see that while you're on the road and hear people singing the song back.

The first time I heard my voice on the radio was "Friends Like That." I was driving home from work and on the phone with my dad. I heard it slowly start fading in and immediately knew what it was. I told him I had to call him back because I wanted to listen.

I always had it in the back of my mind that I might want to do my own thing as an artist, but songwriting is really what brought me to Nashville. That's what I fell in love with in the years leading up to moving here. I started writing with some people back in North Carolina, caught the bug and dove into that side of the industry. I've been a fan of songwriters ever since, and a lot of my favorite artists started that way, too. Right now I'm just enjoying the ride.

There wasn't a specific moment where I felt ready to step out from behind the scenes. I honestly didn't really know how to approach it and probably did a lot of things backwards. My thing has been trying to be prepared when opportunities come and take advantage of them in an honest way. That's what keeps things moving.

Being out on the road with Jason Aldean in 2021 and 2022 taught me a lot. His crew is such a well-oiled machine. It was inspiring to see what things can turn into if you keep grinding and putting out good music. He treats everybody well and I'm very fortunate to have him as a boss. It's pretty cool to work for a guy like that.

"Trouble With A Heartbreak" was probably the song I wished I'd had more time to live with before it got cut. Things moved pretty quickly after we wrote it, but I remember thinking [Aldean] was probably going to make a lot more happen with it at that point than I could,

been fortunate to meet. It's fun to see your song go from an idea to something that goes to radio and starts growing your audience and broadening your listeners. It hits different markets, and it's cool to

so that was the determining factor:

so that was the determining factor:

I don't think it's weird hearing someone else sing something personal I wrote. There are songs I've connected with that I didn't write. Writing is tricky, and I haven't cracked the code, but from what I've learned from veteran writers, the more honest you are and the more you refine and spend time getting the song right, the better it becomes. That process helped me not only become a better songwriter but also figure out what I want my sound to be as an artist. Writing different genres and styles helps you learn how you would do it yourself.

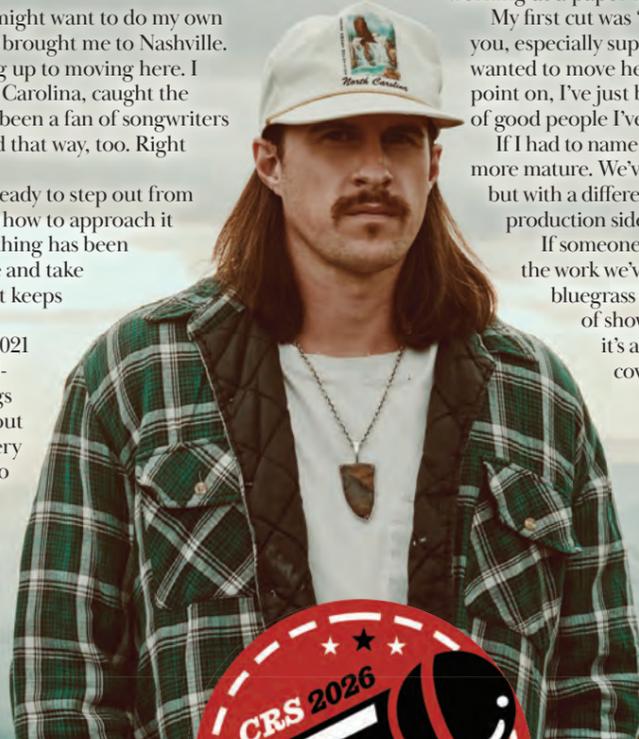
Being from North Carolina definitely shaped me. I'm pretty blue-collar, I guess you'd call it. I like writing things that feel real and being intentional with lyrics and melody. Trying to make something catchy with a solid lyric is the goal, and it's just a fun job. I'm super thankful I get to do it and still get to chase songs for other artists, too.

If I wasn't doing this, I'd probably have been fired from something by now, but hopefully I'd still be around sports somehow. I played basketball for a couple years after high school, so that was fun. Otherwise, I'd probably be working at a paper mill.

My first cut was "If I Didn't Love You." Having someone believe in you, especially superstars, was a really cool feeling. It validated why I wanted to move here and gave me a big confidence boost. From that point on, I've just been chasing everything else, and it's led me to a lot of good people I've been fortunate to surround myself with.

If I had to name the era of music I'm in right now, I'd say it feels a little more mature. We've been cutting new songs, and it still feels like me, but with a different perspective. We've gotten a better handle on the production side this time around. It's been fun refining that process.

If someone discovers me for the first time at CRS, I hope they see the work we've been putting in and the consistency. I come from a bluegrass background where you don't have to do a whole lot of showmanship ... you just have to be a good player. Now it's about getting comfortable in our set, mixing in some covers people love, and playing new songs.



Nashville is a town full of "no." You hear it a lot every day, so anytime you get to be honored and recognized for your hard work, it's an incredible moment. Everybody in that class with me are friends and people I've come up with. Ella Langley is having the most insane career blow-up, and she's a friend. So I'm really honored; it was a huge boost of confidence for me that I'm on the right track.

One of the more memorable CRS moments was when Mitchell [Tenpenny] and I first started dating. I had been on tour in Canada for a month and had just started talking long-distance. The first time I saw him after we'd started this relationship was at CRS. We were both running around doing events, and

## MEGHAN PATRICK

he asked me to meet him at the Riser House suite to introduce me to a lot of his friends and people he worked with. And it was the first time I was officially introduced as his girlfriend. Being in a relationship where we're both artists is about finding balance. It can be easy to get caught up talking too much about work because we're both immersed in it, but our relationship is built on much more than that. At the same time, it's a big part of why we work. We're both extremely passionate about what we do. Being with someone who understands the ins and outs, the ups and downs, and the sacrifice this career requires makes a huge difference. In past relationships, I felt like I was constantly apologizing or feeling guilty for how committed I was to chasing this dream. With Mitchell, I've never had to explain that, let alone apologize for it, because he gets it. There's an incredible sense of freedom and trust knowing he understands what it means to love something so much and what it takes to make it happen.

We live in Nashville, but I still go back to Canada a lot. It's important for me to maintain and take care of my Canadian fans. They've been there with me since the beginning and are the ones who really gave me my career. I love them and try to get back as much as I can. I'm touring both the U.S. and Canada this year, and my family is still there as well.

I had my first band The Sirens when I was 13. We wrote songs, made a record and played "gigs," which really meant my guitarist's mom driving us in her minivan to perform at other schools' morning assemblies. But through high school and into college, my dream was snowboarding at the Olympics. Before snowboarding, I did gymnastics for 10 years with intense Russian coaches. I learned commitment, discipline and resilience at a young age. Those qualities have served me well in the music industry.

In my senior year of high school, I had a bad fall at a snowboarding competition. I broke my back, snapped my collarbone, dislocated my shoulder, broke ribs and had a severe concussion. Honestly, I should have been paralyzed. I was lucky to walk away from that accident. It was a huge turning point in my life because everything I thought I was supposed to be doing was suddenly gone. Even if I physically recovered, I had to ask myself whether I even wanted to go back to that. It scared me. I felt lucky just to be walking.

During recovery, I was bedridden for months and really depressed. I was in a lot of pain, and the recovery was rough. Writing lyrics and listening to music were some of the only things that kept me moving forward. When I came out on the other side of that injury, it felt like a fresh start and a different direction. I did go back and compete for another year because I wanted to leave snowboarding on my own terms, not out of fear. But I realized my heart wasn't in it anymore. That injury was really God's way of redirecting me to where I was meant to be.

When I started performing again and building a band at McGill University, every time I stepped on stage I felt something I'd never felt snowboarding. It felt like exactly where I was meant to be and exactly what I was meant to be doing.

This chapter of my career is the "Golden Era," tied to my album *Golden Child*. Making that record marked a major turning point. It changed how I wrote songs and what I wanted to say. It represented the end of some toxic relationships personally and professionally. It allowed me to truly ask myself who I am and what I want. I

stopped trying to be what everyone else thought I needed to be and dug deeper than ever before to make the most personal, raw and vulnerable record I've ever made. I was stepping into the world as my true self for the first time in my career.

If someone discovers me for the first time at CRS, I hope they walk away feeling inspired and touched by the music. I've been chasing this dream for over 20 years. As an indie female artist who broke through at radio, I'm incredibly proud of my team and what we've accomplished. I hope they see the depth and the longevity in what I'm building. I'm not going to be a flash in the pan or a one-hit wonder. There's a long and successful career ahead.



CONGRATULATIONS  
**MEGHAN PATRICK**



**CRS NEW FACES  
CLASS OF 2026**

**SEE YOU AT THE SHOW FRIDAY**

# *What If We Don't*

---

*Ashley McBryde*



*New Single At  
Country Radio*

**CHASE MATTHEW**

**HOLDIN' IT DOWN**

**NEW SINGLE AT  
COUNTRY RADIO NOW**

**2026 CRS NEW FACES**





Being named a *New Face* feels like validation that the work I've put in writing, performing and connecting with fans has resonated. Professionally, it opens doors and connects me with people in the industry who are as passionate about country music as I am. It's humbling and motivating.

When I first started coming to town in 2018-19, I remember going to more public-facing *CRS* events to meet people. I also remember sneaking into some events or asking people to get me into rooms. So it's pretty cool to actually be invited now.

## JOSH ROSS

Nashville always felt like the dream. I didn't know a ton about it until I visited for the first time going into 2018. Growing up in Canada, I loved sports and was a consumer of a lot of music. Once I got into the industry, I knew that if I wanted to pursue country seriously, Nashville was where I needed to be.

The Canadian and U.S. fans are extremely loyal, so the connection with fans feels universal. The coolest part for me is seeing the different areas of both countries that really embrace country music. People respond to honest stories and emotions no matter where they're from.

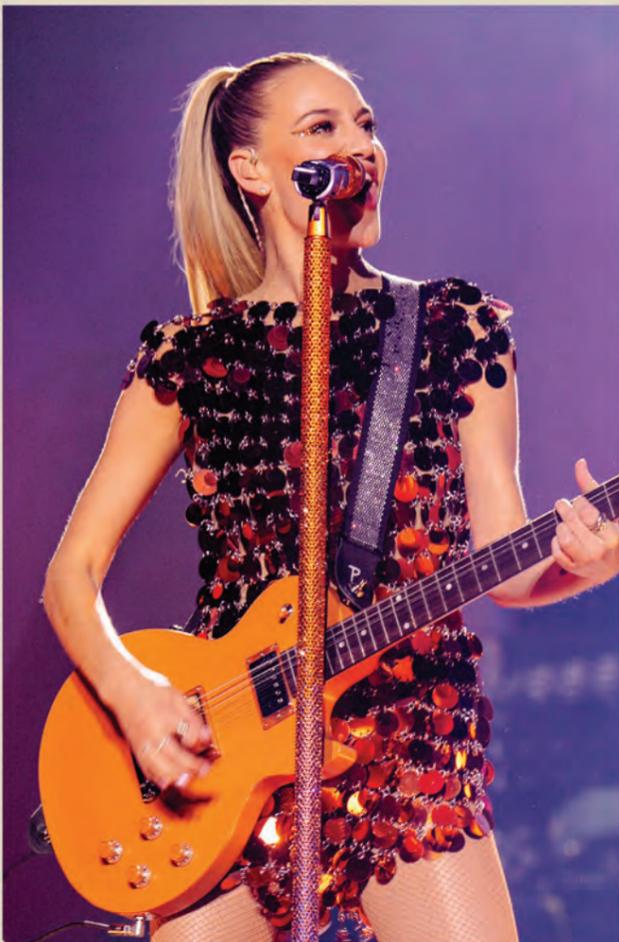
Being an athlete taught me discipline, focus and how to handle both wins and losses. It has helped me stay consistent, work hard every day and understand the value of teamwork. When everyone works together, the results are way bigger than what you could do alone. I am super grateful I was involved in so many different sports. I have always loved and connected to

music. As long as I can remember, music was playing 24/7 in my childhood home. When I got injured in college and sports wrapped up, music became an amazing pivot for my mental health. It felt good to dive into something that gave me the same focus and purpose that sports had given me. I felt like I could get my feelings out through lyrics and performance.

I have always believed in being honest with myself and my fans. My emotions, experiences and struggles are part of who I am. I am definitely not perfect, but I am always learning, and sharing those lessons through music feels natural. It is about being real and hoping people see themselves in the songs.

Early on, it could feel intimidating to release songs that personal. "First Taste of Gone" was really the first time I felt like people could relate to exactly what I was going through. That was when things started to work for me. I have always tried to be genuine and show my vulnerable side, and now it definitely feels natural because it is truly who I am.

CAC



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2026**

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**JAKE  
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**ALEXANDRA  
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# RISER HOUSE

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St. Jude patient  
Erma



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### ABBREVIATION KEY:

<b>A</b>	Assistant	<b>LO</b>	Label Operations
<b>AC</b>	Account Manager	<b>LR</b>	Label Resources
<b>ACO</b>	Account Coordinator	<b>M</b>	Marketing
<b>AD</b>	Artist Development	<b>MAS</b>	Marketing & Artist Strategy
<b>ADP</b>	Audience Platforms	<b>ME</b>	Media
<b>AE</b>	Artist Engagement	<b>MF</b>	Multi-Format
<b>AIP</b>	Activator & Indicator	<b>MG</b>	Manager
	Promotion	<b>MGT</b>	Management
<b>AM</b>	Administration	<b>MP</b>	Managing Partner
<b>AMG</b>	Artist Management	<b>MR</b>	Music Row
<b>AP</b>	Audio Production	<b>MW</b>	Midwest
<b>AS</b>	Associate	<b>N</b>	National
<b>ASM</b>	Associate Manager	<b>ND</b>	National Director
<b>ASD</b>	Associate Director	<b>NE</b>	Northeast
<b>AV</b>	Advertising	<b>NPR</b>	National Promotion
<b>B</b>	Business	<b>NS</b>	National Strategy
<b>BA</b>	Business Affairs	<b>O</b>	Owner
<b>BO</b>	Booking	<b>OC</b>	Original Content
<b>BR</b>	Brand Strategy	<b>OP</b>	Operations
<b>C</b>	Content	<b>OPM</b>	Operations Manager
<b>CA</b>	Canada	<b>P</b>	President
<b>CD</b>	Content Development	<b>PD</b>	Production
<b>CE</b>	Central	<b>PR</b>	Promotion
<b>CH</b>	Chairman	<b>PRM</b>	Promotion & Mktg.
<b>CMS</b>	Commercial Strategy	<b>PRNS</b>	Promotion & National Strategy
<b>CMP</b>	Commercial Partnerships		
<b>CO</b>	Coordinator	<b>PRS</b>	Promotion Strategy
<b>COM</b>	Communications	<b>PS</b>	Playlist Strategy
<b>CR</b>	Creative	<b>PTM</b>	Project Manager
<b>CS</b>	Chart Strategy	<b>PU</b>	Publicity
<b>CSI</b>	Content Strategy & Innovation	<b>PUB</b>	Publishing
	Content Strategy Officer	<b>R</b>	Regional
<b>CSO</b>	Content Strategy Officer	<b>RA</b>	Radio
<b>CT</b>	Central	<b>RAS</b>	Radio Strategy
<b>D</b>	Director	<b>RC</b>	Radio Consultant
<b>DE</b>	Development	<b>RD</b>	Regional Director
<b>DC</b>	Digital Content	<b>RI</b>	Radio Initiatives
<b>DG</b>	Digital	<b>RM</b>	Radio Marketing
<b>DI</b>	Digital Initiatives	<b>RP</b>	Regional Promotion
<b>DM</b>	Digital Marketing	<b>RS</b>	Radio & Streaming
<b>DP</b>	Digital Partners	<b>RSGS</b>	Radio Syndication & Group Strategy
<b>DMS</b>	Digital Media Strategy		
<b>DS</b>	Digital Streaming	<b>RT</b>	Radio Tour
<b>DSM</b>	Digital Sales & Marketing	<b>S</b>	Secondary
<b>E</b>	East	<b>SC</b>	Senior Coord.
<b>EC</b>	East Coast	<b>SD</b>	Senior Director
<b>EA</b>	Executive Assistant	<b>SE</b>	Southeast
<b>EXC</b>	Executive Consultant	<b>SI</b>	Strategic Initiatives
<b>EXCO</b>	Executive Coordinator	<b>SND</b>	Senior National Dir.
<b>EXT</b>	Executive Team	<b>SM</b>	Social Media
<b>EVP</b>	Executive Vice President	<b>SR</b>	Streaming
<b>F</b>	Founder	<b>ST</b>	Specialist
<b>FP</b>	Field Promotion	<b>SU</b>	Support
<b>GM</b>	General Manager	<b>SW</b>	Southwest
<b>GRD</b>	Graphic Design	<b>SXM</b>	SXM Radio
<b>HOL</b>	Head Of Label	<b>SY</b>	Radio Syndication
<b>IM</b>	Integrated Marketing	<b>T</b>	Touring
<b>JD</b>	Junior Director	<b>TX</b>	Texas
<b>LH</b>	Label Head	<b>W</b>	West
<b>LC</b>	Label Consultant	<b>WC</b>	West Coast

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# TRAVIS DAILY

## Changing The Narrative

**A**s Cumulus VP/Country, WKDF & WSM-FM/ Nashville PD and WKDF afternoon personality Travis Daily could be viewed as a sign of the times for corporate radio. Looking past the many hats and long hours, however, a vision for radio's future emerges. Most notably, WKDF has become an incubator for unconventional programming choices, highlighted by the station being 74% current on 142 unique titles – a clear outlier amongst reporting stations (Mediabase, week of Feb. 15). Daily hopes to prove a concept that could spread to other Cumulus markets, while challenging colleagues and competitors alike to embrace an aggressive approach for the medium.

**Your two-year anniversary is coming up. How has the workflow changed, if it has?**

It is always changing, because at Cumulus we're always looking for a better way. The workflow has probably doubled, but a lot of that is I didn't expect to be back on the air. And I'm not complaining about that. I'm just saying that other people with my type of position aren't doing a show on top of it. And I'm taking phone calls and preparing audio instead of mailing it in by voice-tracking. I get asked a lot, "How do you get all this stuff done?" But I love every second of it, so it doesn't feel like work.

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I was close to getting out of radio before I found [Cumulus SVP/Content & Audience-Operations] John Dimick. And this is not me brown-nosing my bosses. I am genuinely grateful every day for [EVP/Content & Audience] Brian Phillips and John Dimick. They and this company have given me new hope. Yeah, there's a ton of work to do, but this is probably the happiest I've ever been.

**Being on air – was that a budget decision, inability to find someone you felt great about, or a combination?**

With what we're trying to do on WKDF, it takes a unique personality. I think I stink on the air in a lot of situations, but if we're talking about the main goal of the *Jesse James Morning Show*, me and [middayer] Lucas Phelan being to disrupt, I'm probably your guy for that. I reluctantly took this on, mainly because I take the other part of my job as VP/Country very seriously and I don't want to be mediocre at either. I don't know how long that's going to last. I can keep this pace for a long time, but I don't know if I can keep it forever. I guess we'll find out.

**I heard you on the air the other day talking about sending a listener to a Cody Jinks and Five Finger Death Punch show. Do those conversations inform what you're doing with the rest of your role?**

Yeah. Personal opinion, but part of radio's problem in broad strokes is we don't do a great job of listening to the listener. We seem to have some really strong views on things that I am just not sure are true. Is it weird for a Country station to give away Cody Jinks and Five Finger Death Punch tickets? Some of my coworkers in the industry probably think so, but if you answer my phone, the listeners sure don't. So I don't really care about the opinions of the industry. I care what the guy in Murfreesboro calling my request line thinks.

**What's the balance between what you're doing for the Nashville cluster and what you're doing as format captain?**

Again, this is going to sound like I'm brown-nosing, but if you know my history, I've always been truthful, which is probably why I've lost some big jobs. That said, we have the greatest support team. Yes, we're a big company with a corporate structure, but it doesn't feel that way. Dimick, Brian Phillips, the other format captains – we all help each other. I've been in situations before where everybody just looked out for themselves. That's not what this is. [VP/Urban] Kenny Smoov is next door to me. We work together on things even though our formats couldn't be more different.

My job is probably 75% local and 25% VP/Country. That's also because we have a lot of great PDs who make the VP part of the job way easier. They're programming their brands for their markets and coming up with ideas. That's one of the biggest things that I'm proud of in the very short time I've been here is the idea sharing has increased tenfold. I am a huge believer that together we have more answers, so I've got everybody participating from the smallest markets up. And the great ideas come from everywhere.

**How much of your interaction with the music industry is focused on putting things on the air in Nashville, and how much is related to your Cumulus-wide influence?**

I would answer that question differently last May than I'm going to answer it now. Last May, there certainly would be a WKDF-Cumulus separation. Now that 'KDF has gone to more album cuts than singles – and because I've been very clear that some records are two weeks cool and some might be a year cool – Nashville is finally getting what we're doing. They understand that we're not going to play by any traditional rules, so why are we wasting time talking about it? So the calls are probably only 10% about 'KDF, and a lot of that is me bringing up ideas to partner with us on. It's not them working music.

Labels probably have less complaints about WKDF than any radio station in America because I'm not sure how you complain about us playing half the Jordan Davis album. I've got eight Ella Langley cuts on the air and 10 from Zach Top. That has been the godsend of this little experiment of ours. Labels have songwriters, publishers, publicists and managers in their ear about how great it is that a radio station is playing something other than or in addition to the single.

**After more than six months programming this way, what have you learned? How do you decide what's working?**

There's a lot of secret sauce involved in that, probably more than people realize. My son just graduated college and is working part-time at Big Loud and part-time for us. But there is a separation of church and state between the two. He's also got a couple of databases he created of people in the 19 to 27 age range





and is running some research projects that are very unique in allowing us to get music on the radio before even some of the DSP people are aware of it. We also have all of our radio databases I can tap into. If I'm just being completely honest about it, a big part of our system is we've got a playlist of 103

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songs that he and I are going to sit outside and listen to this weekend. They end up in one of three piles: Cool enough for 'KDF, not cool enough and maybe. We go through the "cool enoughs" and "maybes" and try to make good decisions.

We're still finding our way. We're figuring out that some of the texture records that are way out there are allowed. The audience accepts and loves them, but what they really want is 10 more Megan Moroney cuts. When we came out of the chute in June, we had a lot of alt-country stuff and listeners thought it was cool, but you very quickly learn, "Hey, could we just have five more Luke Comb songs? Could we have six more from Aldean?" That's probably the biggest lesson.

### How do you know when those "out there" records are working?

The coolest part for me is finding artists who are barely getting started and seeing them go from 300 to 1,200 tickets – selling out venues. That's the power of radio, man. We're in a town where a lot of this is pretend. If I go work at Home Depot tomorrow, my phone's going to stop ringing. But we've seen artists go from being developmental to a focus at their company. There are a couple who've gotten signed because a manager or publisher went, "Good enough to be on the air in Nashville? Can we get a meeting?" Winning in our format is the most important, but I get almost as much pleasure when an artist no one's ever heard of says, "Man, I just wanted to call and thank you because we just sold out last night and I've never done that." I make fun of everything and I'm pretty insensitive, but I tear up in those situations. That's a beautiful thing. We're supposed to be in this together. It doesn't have to be this adversarial pretend game we're all playing half the time with the chart. But I'm sure we'll get to that in a second.

### How do you decide which of the 10 Megan Moroney cuts needs to move up to power, or come back to medium?

This is going to sound like BS, but it's feel. I have the benefit of being in the studio and feeling what the audience has given us. Jesse, his producer Monti [Erin Merimonti] and me – we're out in it more than a lot of people. My staff will tell you one of the things I say ad nauseum is that for us to be successful, we have to get out there. Listeners are

very vocal when you've got it right. We can feel the momentum on the streets. That could be me getting gas in the middle of nowhere where I live and somebody going, "Hey, I listen to the radio station. You're Travis, right?" I know how that sounds, and I try and stay low key. But when they're bringing up artists we're playing who aren't even on the chart, it's so beautiful. Our request line is ringing because we're connecting with Nashville and we're just getting warmed up. This is nowhere close to where I know it could be if we just execute our plans.

Back to rotations, I move stuff around all the time. This could end up a complete failure, but if it works, what it's really going to prove is that art will beat science every time. I don't have anything against scientists, but when I'm deciding who to go

**“We’ve done a bad job of telling our story, and I am hell bent on fixing that narrative”**

out drinking with, it's going to be the artists – not a bunch of scientists. I'm not exactly answering the question, but when artists drop a few grat-tracks, we go. Then we pull it off the air when it doesn't feel right anymore.

### Is the airstaff gelling the way you hoped?

Yeah. This is supposed to be fun. We're telling jokes in between songs, not solving the world's problems. I don't want to, but if we could ever quit messing around in the hallway, I could probably get my work done faster. But we're having so much fun. We just can't.

**You talked about being low key, but you also wore your Hot Rod and Gator t-shirt for the photo shoot, so ...**

It's just not that serious. Do we make fun of everything? Sure. Including ourselves, by the way. And if our competition wants to take shots at us, I would welcome it. When that happens, radio gets noticed and everything rises. If everyone did great radio, that's good for all of us. I don't want somebody who's laying down and reading liners. I want someone coming at me full force and, if they beat me, they have my respect. And if they don't, I'm probably going to make fun of them some more.

### Your tag line from last year's CRS: "Fake No. 1s." Has your thinking on that evolved?

No. My dad was a baseball coach and in my house, we didn't accept or respect participation trophies. My son played sports, too, and it was the same thing. I'm not looking to hurt any artist's career, I just don't think all songs are equal. Every No. 1 is not a real No. 1. For the most part, I don't think the artists are aware of what's going on. If they knew they had a fake No. 1, I wonder what their take would be. I certainly acknowledge that it's not a black and white issue. Pushing a song to No. 1 in the right circumstance can be career changing. The rest of the time, I'm not sure that it is. There are a lot of artists who get one who don't sell any more tickets or go on to more success, but their label put a lot of effort into getting there. My issue is the chart needs to move faster. We have people planning No. 1 pushes 14 weeks from now. If it really was the best and most-played song in America, how could you possibly know that? I'm not looking to get in the way of anybody's career, but we have to be a little more real about this. And until radio actually works together to speed up the chart, it's not going to change.

**Historically, there have been No. 1s that were a bridge to future success, even if it didn't impact sales or status in the moment – artists we all know who took years and years to become some of the biggest acts in the format. If we wipe that out of the business, are we poorer for it as an industry?** Could be. Look, I love all of the record companies. I do. But their philosophy is everything's a No. 1. Sometimes a top 10 is great and could be life changing. We don't acknowledge that, though, because it's an all or nothing deal. I don't know why that is. Put out quality music and don't worry about the chart, just cater to the fans, and I promise it'll go better.

### Is it perhaps the systemic pressure behind the No. 1 drive that you object to, more than a tweener song getting its shot at the top?

I don't know how to answer that, because my mind wanders on that almost every week. I don't think people have any clue how intense that pressure is now. I've been doing this a long time and today is the most pressure ever from labels. I'm not trying to stand in the

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## — THE FACTS —

- ★ BORN and RAISED in NASHVILLE, Tennessee, Jet turned 21 on Thanksgiving.
- ★ Jet started on stage PERFORMING MUSIC at 3. He was ACTING at 4
- ★ Currently enrolled at BELMONT University, Jet is collaborating constantly with the next generation of Nashville talent
- ★ Jet's "get to know radio!" tour includes numerous STATION EVENTS - running all the way through the year
- ★ "NOTHING ON YOU" is impacting everywhere this spring
- ★ Jet has raised over \$25k for the RYAN SEACREST Foundation

## — THE MUSIC —

- ★ A half million plus streams on "NOTHING ON YOU." A story is brewing
- ★ Jet CO-WROTE all 11 songs on his current album

## — THE ACTING —

- ★ Jet's worked with some of THE BEST. Among them are Clint Eastwood, Tim Allen, Bradley Cooper, Betty White, Sabrina Carpenter, and Reese Witherspoon
- ★ "American Sniper." "Will and Grace." "Ozark." "Last Man Standing."
- ★ Jet has even been the voice of myriad CARTOON characters - nationwide favorite BUBBLE GUPPIES being one

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way of their success, but let's be honest, some songs just aren't No. 1s. They fall off the chart and you never hear them again. Did that really help the artist?

**Back to the format captain aspect – to what extent is what you are doing at WKDF bleeding into other aspects of Cumulus ... maybe even in the building? Are people watching? What level of adoption have you seen?**

People are certainly watching and talking about it. We're still in our infancy, so it's okay to watch from

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a distance and go, "Is this dude out of his mind?" I'm sure there are members of my own team who aren't sure if this is going to work. I'm certain our competitors don't think it's going to, but we'll see. I don't think greatness comes without risk. And what if we're right? Allow for the possibility that there might be another way.

For me, this has to work because I'm not sure I could go back to programming the way we've always done it. I've seen what this could be. I and the team just have to execute it right. We have to prove it can work. True story, a 60-year-old woman called in who had no idea who Vincent Mason was. Her granddaughter showed her how to use Instagram and now she's calling in to tell me all about what he's posting. Another lady called and said she didn't use social media, but she signed up to learn more about all these songs we're playing. These are radio listeners who are never going to subscribe to a DSP, but they're finding Rhys Rutherford when they're in the car, looking him up

and then calling my request line to hear him again. Music discovery on radio is alive and well, but we have done a terrible job of feeding it. People ask why we're playing songs that aren't singles ... that's why.

**There's always going to be a percentage of the audience that would never buy a subscription service, for a number of reasons.**

That number is a lot bigger than people think and I talk to them every day. Rarely does a day go by without somebody texting, posting or calling about a Morgan Wallen song we're playing that they've never heard. It's amazing how many people don't even have his album on their phone. They hear "98 Braves" and are like, "Wow, I'm a Braves fan. I love that song!" The connection has always been the music, so make the music and your content exciting so you can connect.

I've had three or four people call me crying about Kasey Tyndall's "Middle Man." They're like, "That was me growing up. I had to deliver the child support payment from my dad to my mom." I don't care if it's a single. And you know what? I bet if you ask Kasey Tyndall, she doesn't care either. I bet she cares that she touched a bunch of lives that she'll never know she even touched. "Whiskey Colored Crayon" by Lainey Wilson ran through our process and looked better than any of the singles. "Jesus Saves" by Riley Green is another one. Not a day goes by that we don't get a request for that song. So circling back to the earlier question, it's about feel. As long as people are calling and crying about a song like that, we're going to keep playing it. And then when I feel like it's not there anymore, we'll move on to something else.

**Is there something unique about the Nashville**

**market that allows this to work, or is it replicable?**

Let's see if this continues to work here and I'll answer that question. Our view has been, if it doesn't work in Nashville, it's not going to work anywhere. And from everything I can measure and see at this moment, it's working. Now, I don't want to go, "Oh, cool. We had a good couple of months. Let's spread it everywhere." But what if we're sitting here six months from now and this continues at this rate and we continue to grow?

**You can't talk about Nielsen because of the lawsuit with Cumulus, but can you talk about DTS AutoStage?**

There are some new tools out there that have allowed me to find the music lane on WKDF very quickly. The other interesting part is, if programming like it's 1995 is still the way, we should have been obliterated the second we put 80 unfamiliar songs on the air. We weren't. Our TSL went up. That was the first kind of groundbreaking proof that allowed me to say, "I promise it's okay." As long as the song is good, they're going to keep listening. That's what it comes down to. Play the good ones more and play the bad ones less. Or don't play the bad ones at all.

**Are there other changes beyond the music and air staff?**

The most beautiful part about working with [Nashville VP/MM] Allison Warren is she is a "how can we," not a "what we should" leader. There's almost no given week that one of us doesn't have an idea. Maybe we don't know how to execute it yet, but we're going to figure it out. So I would love to answer that question again for you here in a few months because we've got a lot of things we've workshopped that we're really close to executing. There is an open flow of ideas in this building that might come from a part-timer on air, it might be Allison, it might be me, it might be Jesse or producer Monti. They might be grandiose, but we don't ever look at it and go, "Oh no, we couldn't do that."

**Final thoughts?**

The absolute best part of this gig is working with Brian, Dimick, Allison and the team. Brian and Dimick think I'm full of crap, but if I had met those guys 20 years ago, my life could have been very different. And I don't regret anything in life, even when I mess up. I do regret not meeting those two earlier because it's been literally life changing and, regardless of how this thing goes, I will always be grateful to them.

And I'm grateful to Allison. If you don't know me, it's a lot to take in a first meeting. I march to my own beat, or whatever that phrase is. So I'm grateful that she took a chance because I had a lot of crazy ideas coming in here and she's the most supportive market manager I've ever worked for, and I've worked for some really good ones. Some really bad ones, too.

I have done this my whole life and I believe in radio wholeheartedly. I have seen the power it has to raise money for kids in need. I've seen how one song or the right stupid joke between songs can change somebody's day. We've done a bad job of telling our story, and I am hell bent on fixing that narrative.

My wish for the entire industry is for everybody to take a step back, have some fun and be grateful every time they get to step on the field. It is a privilege and an honor to crack that mic, so take that responsibility seriously and give it everything you've got. Then if you get beat, it's okay. You gave your best effort. If we do that, radio is king again. **CAC**



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